



SILENCE AND SURVEILLANCE

A HISTORY OF CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

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In one of the final scenes of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, the three men exploring the forbidden Zone – Writer, Professor, and Stalker – are close to entering the room where, allegedly, people's wishes come true. After having passed through a landscape of ruins and elements of a destroyed civilization, they pause in a small room on the side of a water-filled pool, full of lost cultural artifacts. In the middle of all the junk, an old-fashioned telephone on the floor mystically gives a ring. The Writer answers the call, but quickly replies, "No, this is not the clinic!" and slams the receiver down. It is a misdialed call from the other world, with which the Zone seems to have no contact.¹

The scene in *Stalker* is a random example of how the telephone in the Russian and Soviet context can have completely different connotations from those found in an American or Western European film, where the phone call is a common device for speeding up the action and focusing the spectator's attention on the solution of the plot. The differences have a historical explanation.

THE TELEPHONE IN RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

The history and sociology of the telephone in Russian society have only slowly become the object of serious study.² The scope of this essay is limited to the following two topics: first, the forms of use, in pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union, of the telephone as a means of communication, potentially universally available and "horizontal" but actually restricted by "vertical" forces; and second, the symbolism that accumulated around this means of communication in Russian and Soviet culture.

The telephone, during its almost 150-year history, has created new spatial-temporal conditions for communication. Before Bell's invention, communication entailed either the simultaneous presence of the participants in one and the same place (conversation, discussion), or the overcoming of geographical distance between the sender and addressee at the cost of lost time and the exclusion of any signals not recorded

in the text (written correspondence or telegram). The appearance of the telephone created a new situation involving simultaneous contact over great distance, as a result of which the significance of the human voice increased dramatically. At the same time, the loss of paralinguistic signals that accompany ordinary speech required active compensation on the part of the participants in a telephone conversation.

Sociologists seem to agree on the availability of telephone communications and telephones as one of the indicators of a society's degree of modernization.³ In Russia, the telephone, like many other technical novelties, appeared early but had a very limited geographical and social distribution. In 1896, the Bell Telephone Company published what was in all likelihood the first telephone directory for Moscow, containing approximately 2,200 telephone numbers for private individuals and organizations; most of all it resembled the membership list of a motorist club.⁴ According to international statistics, Russia was far behind the US and leading European nations around 1900 in the number of inhabitants (of all ages) per telephone:



USA – 60, Sweden – 115, Switzerland – 129, Germany – 397, France – 1,216, Italy – 2,629, Russia – 6,988.⁵

The *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1901) described the successful expansion of the telephone in the West, compared to Russia, in almost lyrical tones:

With the development of urban life, the telephone acquires ever-greater significance; with the intensification of industrial development, it acquires great importance in the countryside as well, particularly in the United States, a country of heightened industrial pace. In order to save expenses on the installation of telephone lines, American farmers use fences surrounding fields; wires strung on these fences serve as telephone lines and special telephone poles are erected only when it is necessary to extend the telephone network across a road. Such telephones cost very little and function very well, even when the fence is covered with dew.⁶

In spite of the low ranking of Russia in comparative statistics, in the upper echelons of society in the two capitals the telephone was as much a part of daily life as in any other large European city. Like other similar novelties (trains, airplanes, or computers), it was initially met with curiosity on the part of some and suspicion on the part of others, but it was generally received as semiotically “charged” and not merely as a practical object of utility. The particular tension between simultaneity and distance, characteristic of all forms of telephone communications, gave rise to various complexes of associations. The communicative situation between two speakers not seeing one another could generate misunderstandings and fantasies, reflected in anecdotes about telephone conversations and telephone operators, and subsequently regulated by books on telephone etiquette. Due to the possibility of direct contact in time without physical presence in space, the telephone eliminated or crossed the boundary between private and public spheres of life; it became what Marshall McLuhan has called “the irresistible

intruder”.⁷ In Russia before World War I and especially after the October Revolution, the possession of an office telephone became a symbol of status and power: the more telephones or different telephone lines an official had at his disposal, the higher his status.⁸

In Western sociology, telephone communications are usually described as a direct, horizontal, centripetal, or even decentralizing means of communication, for which the current metaphor is *the network*.⁹ Such potentialities of the telephone were realized only partially in the Soviet Union, where concepts such as horizontality, centripetal movement, etc., were rather at variance with the fundamental norms of the system.¹⁰ To put it simply, various forces, intended to restrict or counteract the inherent tendencies of the telephone system, were mobilized, namely:

- permanent technical shortcomings: shortage of lines and telephones, low quality of switchboards, absence of automated long-distance (and especially international) lines;
- the creation of separate and secret telephone networks for the state apparatus, which in terms of speed and audibility maintained an entirely different standard than that of the public network;
- wiretapping of telephone lines by state security organs, which deprived the telephone of its function as a “direct” means of communication, regardless of whether surveillance was actually conducted;
- limited circulation of telephone directories, which are a basic and indispensable factor for ensuring the reciprocity and accessibility of telephone communications.

THE LACK OF TELEPHONE DIRECTORIES AS A FEATURE OF SOVIET CULTURE

In the West, the telephone directory or telephone book has always (at least until the computer revolution) been one of the most widely distributed, universally available and content-rich sources of information. However, what we in Sweden, Germany, Poland, or the United States associate with the telephone book – a universally available, open, comprehensive, and regularly published list of telephone subscribers – was scarce in the USSR before the war and almost nonexistent after the war. Granted, there was one well-known type of telephone directory, which was often referred to as *telefonnaia kniga*. The differences between this publication and that which we in the West call a telephone book are quite apparent.

Let us take a look at the directory entitled Moscow: *Telephone Numbers and Addresses of Organizations, Institutions, and Business Enterprises*, 1989, published by the Ministry of Communications in 1989 (the last Soviet edition). The first thing that strikes one is the composition of the directory. All entities listed as having telephone numbers, i.e. the universe of the telephone book, are divided into fourteen concentric sections, or categories with subsections – from governmental institutions of the USSR and the RSFSR and Communist Party organizations down to “emergency services, bathhouses, domestic services, garage construction cooperatives, housing construction cooperatives, hotels, cemeteries, crematoriums, pawnshops, hair salons, sew-

ing, repairs, manufacture, laundries, rental agencies, repair services, photography, darkrooms, photography studios, dry cleaning, and dyeing".¹¹

The universe formed here – Moscow, capital of the USSR – by its structure is actually reminiscent of the Tree of Knowledge (originating from Francis Bacon and the *Encyclopédie* of d'Alembert and Diderot). In the *Moscow–1989* telephone directory, each concept – be it an organization, institution, or business – has its own predetermined place on the branches of the Tree. Who is the implied reader of such a telephone directory, if we consider what is said and left unsaid in the text? It is apparent that s/he is an enlightened reader who does not require an introduction to the norms of the Tree of Knowledge, which is in fact the Tree of Power. It is expected of her/him that s/he will know (or will not question) why the world is divided into fourteen categories, and which subsections are to be found under which category. This reader's point of view coincides with the point of view of the Center, the center of bureaucratic and administrative power, for which the principles of order and subordination are obvious and indisputable. One could hardly expect anything different from a directory with a print run of 250,000 for a population of nearly 10 million.

Thus, a kind of telephone directory did exist, primarily as an administrative instrument available to a minority. It resembled the "Yellow Pages" long known in Western countries and widely published in Russia today. However, the telephone directory as understood in the West, i.e. a universally available list of private subscribers, published with the aim of facilitating communication among citizens, appeared only as an exception in the USSR. Prior to the Second World War, this kind of directory was published only rarely. The last edition of *Vsya Moskva* [All Moscow], a mixture of a Moscow "Yellow Pages" and a telephone directory, appeared in 1936.¹² In 1937 and 1939, telephone directories for Moscow were actually published. They have, however, been extremely hard for foreign scholars to gain access to, and the number of copies printed has not been established.¹³ In connection with the evacuation during World War II, existing telephone books were systematically destroyed and very few new editions appeared during the Stalin era.¹⁴

An interesting event was the publication of the four-volume directory of Moscow telephone subscribers in 1971–1972.¹⁵ From the very outset, this telephone book was a collector's item: the official edition was 50,000 copies for approximately 600,000 telephone subscribers (of whom 67,000 were collective subscribers, i.e., belonging to communal apartments) among 8 million inhabitants.¹⁶ If the above-mentioned *Moscow–1989* directory with its hierarchical structure was compiled for communication along a line leading from the Center to the periphery, then the Moscow directory might appear to have been constructed for horizontal communication between subscribers, like any other such list in the world. Judging from the severely limited size of the edition, however, this was not likely the case. The directory seems in fact to have been calculated to simplify communication within the Center, over the heads of the subscribers themselves.

The potential and dynamics of the telephone communications system in the Soviet Union were thus restricted by powerful means. The telephone was "domesticated" and turned into an instrument of control for those who held power, while for the broad masses it remained an instrument of contact within the private sphere. For ordinary citizens, the telephone became an object associated with two rather independent worlds. On the one hand, there was the world of the power structures, where the telephone mainly com-



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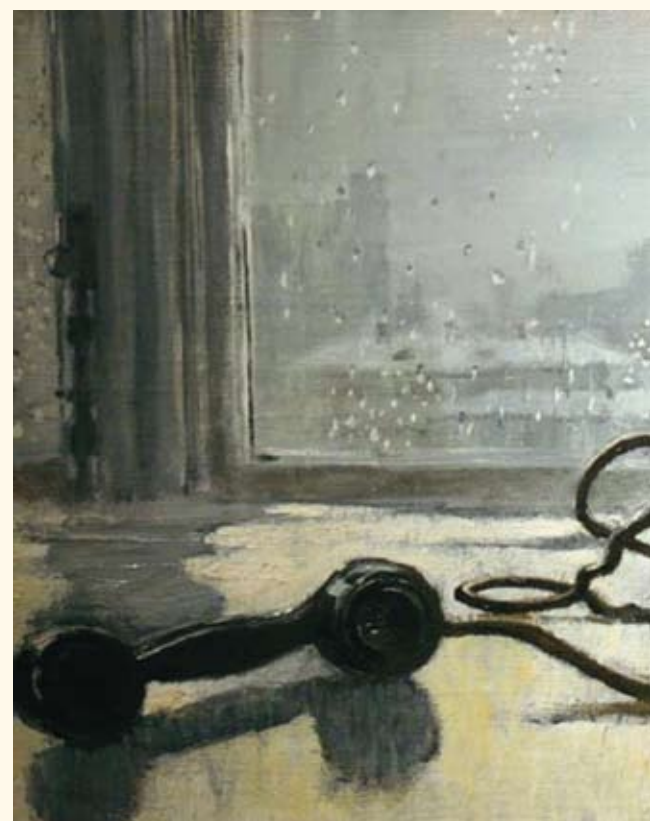
municated internally (or sometimes made ominous calls to the individual citizen), and on the other hand, the "little world" of private life and the part of the public sphere closely connected with it (school, stores, health care). Telephoning within the boundaries of this sphere – excluding intercity (and, where possible, international) calls – was virtually free of cost; until 1992 there were no time restrictions on local calls in Russia. For the "little world", telephone directories were not a necessity.

In Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, the mysterious telephone call answered by the Writer leaves the three men bewildered. But after a short pause, the Professor – the rationalist and technocrat – suddenly picks up the receiver of the old-fashioned telephone and calls a number. The connection works immediately, and he asks for "Laboratory No. 9". As a person used to being in control, the Professor tells the person answering where he is and says that he will not use the bomb he has brought into the Zone. Threatened that he will be reported to the Security organs, he unperturbedly tells the person on the other end of the line (whose voice is also heard) to mind his own business.

"VERTUSHKA"

If telephone communications could play an important role in the process of erasing the boundaries between private and public life in Western Europe and the United States, things were very different in Soviet society.¹⁷ As early as 1922, on Lenin's initiative, a special automated network was installed for the Kremlin bureaucracy, parallel to the public telephone lines. This government telephone was called *vertushka* ["pinwheel", or "whirligig"], because, while the ordinary telephone system was run with manual exchanges – i.e. one had to ask the operator to connect to a certain number – the Kremlin automatic exchange functioned like all telephones today; that is, the subscriber himself dialed the desired number on the rotary dial, hence the name *vertushka*. Later, this telephone was also called *kremlyovka*.

From the beginning, this *vertushka* network, officially called ATS VTsIK [Automatic Telephone Exchange of the Central Executive Committee], had only 100 subscribers. It guaranteed its subscribers high technical quality, swiftness, and



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secrecy of communication.¹⁸ The directory of this exclusive service from 1922 has recently been found and published on the Internet, showing the numbers of all the Party leaders.¹⁹ Gradually, *vertushkas* were installed in the private flats and even dachas of party leaders, ministers, and other members of the highest Soviet elite, both in Moscow and in the capitals of the Soviet republics. In the 1970s, the government ATS was finally divided into two systems, ATS-1 with a maximum of 1000 subscribers, and ATS-2, for the second-highest elite, with a maximum of 5000 subscribers. A leading expert on post-World War II Soviet history, Rudolf Pikhoya, notes that "[p]robably the most exact indication of the size of the highest layer of power in the country is found in the directory of the subscribers of the government telephone net". According to Pikhoya's source – the internal directory of the ATS-1 from 1991 – this system, at the end of the Soviet era, did not have much more than 600 subscribers.²⁰

The *vertushka* was a system for communication and control inside the Soviet elite. Using the ordinary telephone communications system, those in power could call whomever, whenever they pleased, but the reverse was not true. The well-known idiosyncratic telephone habits of Stalin are an extreme example of this. No one ever called Stalin unless he was expecting the call.²¹

An interesting description of Stalin's telephone calls and their immediate effects is found in the memoirs of the famous airplane designer, once vice-minister for aviation, Aleksandr Yakovlev. In the 1930s he was a relative newcomer in the highest Soviet elite:

In 1939, I received a new flat in the house of the ministry at the Patriarch Ponds. The engineers Ilyushin and Polikarpov also took up residence there.

The house was new; a telephone was installed only for Polikarpov. Several times, I was asked to answer a call from Stalin in Polikarpov's flat, which was a floor below. I felt extremely embarrassed. Therefore, when Polikarpov's maid once came running and said that I was asked to call immediately to Poskryobyshev, that is, to Stalin, I went to the next



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shop and rang up from a pay phone in order not to disturb Polikarpov. During the conversation, Stalin asked why I was so late calling back. I explained that I was calling from a pay phone.

He was surprised:

– What, don't you have a telephone?!

The next day, when I came home late from work, I found a municipal telephone in the apartment.

But this was not the whole story. During one of our next conversations, Stalin asked about certain details concerning the armament of a new airplane and put a question that I refused to answer:

– Comrade Stalin, I cannot speak with you about that.

– Why?

– It is prohibited to discuss such matters on a city telephone.

– Yes, of course, I forgot that! But what's that, don't you have a direct telephone at home?

– Of course not.

– Is that not regulated in your job description? answered Stalin laughing.

– Well, good night.

And again, just as in the earlier case, the next day I found on my desk at home beside the city telephone a second one. This was a government telephone, a *vertushka*.²²

IN WESTERNEYES

The peculiarities of the Soviet telephone – situated in the contradiction between the open communication of a new era and the abyss of secrecy – have often been recognized and thematized in Western mass culture. The telephone, traditionally used as a means of heightening suspense in the thriller genre, acquired special connotations in plots set in or connected with Soviet society. Thus, in Walter Wager's novel *Telefon*,²³ a disillusioned KGB officer and participant in a Stalinist conspiracy turns up in the United States, where he intends – for the purpose of sabotaging the policy of détente – to activate a number of “sleeper” Soviet saboteurs who have been planted

in the United States during the Cold War as part of an operation called “Telefon”. However, the KGB, more peaceably inclined during the period of détente, sends another agent to the US to prevent the plan from being implemented.

Frederick Forsyth's *Icon* is a well-known thriller about how an American-British joint force manages to prevent a fascist coup in Moscow in 1999. Eventually the Russian fascist dictator *in spe* Igor Komarov realizes that his plans have failed, and in a rage he attacks a symbol of modernization – the telephone standing on his desk:

Without warning, he began to shriek his rage at his persecutors, using the ruler to hit his own telephone until the plastic cracked and shattered. Grishin stood rigid; down the corridor there was utter silence as the office staff froze where they were.

“... There will be no czar in this land other than me, and when I rule they will learn the meaning of discipline such that Ivan the Terrible will seem like a choirboy.”

As he shouted, he brought the ebony ruler down again and again on the wreckage of the telephone, staring at the fragments as if the once-useful tool was itself the disobedient Russian people, learning the meaning of discipline under the knout.²⁴

THE TELEPHONE IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

The conscious “domestication” of telephone communications in Soviet society was never carried through to completion and always remained inconsistent. As even the most preliminary analysis of telephone symbolism in literature, cinematography, and visual art reveals, the telephone was an exceptionally “charged” object in the Soviet era, with strong connotations, if not a mythical aura.

The telephone first appears in Russian literature in Anton Chekhov's works. His little story “On the Telephone” (1886) makes fun of the difficulties of getting a normal call through, due to the unreliability of the operators.²⁵ The seventeenth-volume Soviet Academy *Dictionary* cites the following quota-

tion from Chekhov's “In the Ravine” (1900): “A telephone was installed at the *volost* government office, but it soon ceased to work.” The *Dictionary*, however, leaves out Chekhov's colorful continuation: “as bedbugs and cockroaches had taken up residence there. The head of the *volost* was semiliterate and capitalized every word in documents, but when the telephone was out of order, he said, ‘Well, now it will be difficult without a telephone’.”²⁶

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the telephone had already become a natural component of life in the big cities of Russia. However, the duality of the telephone – lightning speed on the one hand and the one-channeled character of the communication on the other – created great possibilities for mythologization. Telephone operators, who – in the capacity of a potential third, silent participant – attended communication, served as a topic of both anecdotes and serious texts.²⁷ The strictly non-material, yet intimate nature of telephone conversation was frequently associated with supernatural forces:

Unexpected and bold

A woman's voice on the phone, –

Such delightful harmony

In this bodiless voice!

Joy, your gracious step

Doesn't always pass by:

Clearer than a seraphim's lute

You are even in the phone receiver!²⁸

No less often, the telephone was linked to infernal subterranean forces, to death and suicide: “In this savage, frightening world / You, friend of midnight burials, / In the high, austere office / Of the suicide victim – telephone!”²⁹ However, in literature the telephone became above all a symbol of love, especially unrequited love or separation. As Vadim Rudnev points out in his *Dictionary of Twentieth Century Culture*, “throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the telephone was one of the most stable symbols of love, specifically of love in the twentieth century, a symbol of texts and discourses on love”.³⁰ Examples of this can be found in plays, but first and foremost in poetry and all its subgenres, from high poetry to the lyrics of popular songs. Widely known variations on the theme of the telephone appear in Mayakovsky's works, in Kornei Chukovsky's children's verses (“Telefon”, 1929), in the poetry of Nikolai Zabolotsky (“The Voice in the Telephone”, 1957) and Vladimir Vysotsky (“07”, 1969).

Of particular interest is Mayakovsky's poem “About This”, from 1923. Here, a telephone not only figures as a channel for a (broken-off) liaison; a telephone call and the technology involved are also anthropomorphized and become characters in the poem. In essence, the poem constitutes a chain reaction of associations in the poet's mind during a moment of stopped time in front of an Ericsson telephone while he waits to be connected to his beloved through the telephone lines running below the streets of Moscow. In Mayakovsky's hyperbolized language, this situation of being one-on-one with the telephone develops into “two series of expanded metaphors connected with the telephone: that of the ‘telephone storm’ and that of the ‘telephone duel!’”:³¹

Suddenly

the lamps went berserk,

and then –

the whole telephone network is torn to shreds, see!



Illustrations to Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "It" by Alexander Rodchenko.

"67-10

Connect me!"

In the Little Alley!

Hurry!

Into Vodopiany's quiet!

Look out!

or else electrically that call –
on Xmas Eve –

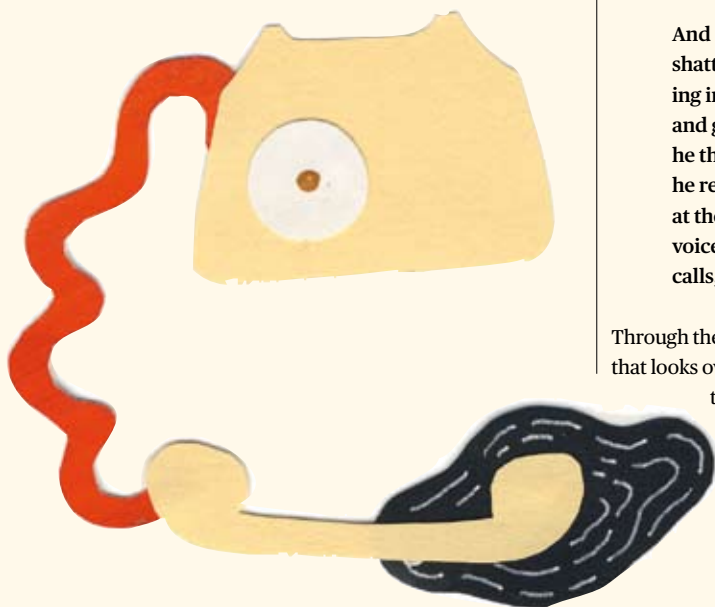
will blow you sky-high –

yes,

with your telephone exchanges and all.³²

The transgression of the boundaries between private and public is striking. In the poem "About This", the telephone is no longer a means of concealing something; on the contrary, all elements of this lovers' drama, including the telephone number of the beloved, are open and transparent.³³

The initial connection among the telephone, love, and distance was subsequently banalized and became a theme of mass culture. Other associations began to develop in the 1920s. After Soviet authorities had confiscated or "communalized" private telephones, the image of the telephone as a symbol of power began to dominate in Russian literature.³⁴ In Boris Pilnyak's "Tale of the Unextinguished Moon" (1926), the telephone as an instrument of power is a constantly pres-



Joseph Stalin in his office in 1949.

ent element of the sinister "machine of the city" which forms the universe of the narrative. The enigmatic leader in "House No. 1" has "three telephones which emphasized the tranquility of the logs crackling on the hearth. The three telephones brought into the room three main arteries of the city, so that, out of that tranquility, the city could be commanded – commanded, that is to say, as regards the city itself and its arteries". It is precisely through this thrice-mentioned system of special telephone communications, "the inside telephone that connected with thirty or forty others" (the *vertushka*), that oral commands for the liquidation of the commander-in-chief of the army on the operating table are transmitted and their execution confirmed.³⁵

In Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* (1929–1940), earlier telephone associations – with notions of infernal forces – are combined with the connection between the telephone and power typical of Soviet literature. From apartment number 50, Woland's retinue unabashedly makes calls to any authority, always with fatal consequences for the telephone subscriber. Calls made to apartment number 50 are not answered by Woland, but, it would seem, by the telephone itself: "They are busy, answered the receiver in a jingling voice. Who's calling?"³⁶ In the Variety Theater, where Woland gives his black magic séance, all the phones are switched off, yet suddenly the telephone rings in the office of the financial director Rimsky, who is seized by panic:

And suddenly the deadly silence of the office was shattered by the sound of the telephone itself, blasting in the financial director's face. He shuddered and grew cold. "Boy, my nerves are really shot", he thought and picked up the receiver, whereupon he recoiled and turned white as a sheet. A soft but at the same time insinuating and depraved female voice whispered into the phone, "Don't make any calls, Rimsky, or you'll be sorry. . . ."³⁷

Through the window Rimsky sees the moon – the same moon that looks over the "machine of the city" in Pilnyak – "and the more he [looked], the more strongly he felt the grip of fear". Naturally, Margarita also receives the invitation to Bald Mountain through a

telephone call from Azazello.³⁸ Only the security services are able to use the telephone so effectively: a single word over the phone from "one of the Moscow institutions" is enough to make the chairman of the Acoustics Commission, Arkady Sempleyarov, stop resisting and realize that he must appear immediately for interrogation.³⁹

In Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *The First*

Circle (1968), the telephone connects two parallel worlds in a fatal way. The plot takes place in the year 1949, in the Moscow of the Soviet elite, and a prison with a particular purpose – a *sharashka*. Events begin with an anonymous telephone conversation: an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs warns a friend, in a call from a pay phone, of a dangerous foreign contact, and the conversation is intercepted by the security services. A group of imprisoned scientists is given the task of identifying the voice on the magnetic tape with the help of modern technology. One floor up in the same prison building, another group is working on the opposite task, namely to construct a telephone for Stalin's office in the Kremlin that is incapable of being tapped. Technology is completely subordinated to totalitarian power, and whoever designs it inevitably becomes the servant of those in power. The cruel irony of the situation consists in the fact that if the researchers from the Acoustic Laboratory succeed in determining which of the five suspects from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs placed the anonymous call, they will essentially be sentencing him to death. The prisoner Rubin attempts in vain, in a conversation with an NKVD officer, to preserve at least an ounce of freedom for himself in this technical-political system:

"Wait. Wait twenty-four hours", protested Rubin. "Give us a chance to produce the complete evidence."

"You'll have your chance when the investigation begins. We'll put a microphone on the interrogator's table and you can listen for three hours on end if you like."

"But one of them is innocent!" cried Rubin.

"Innocent? What d'you mean?" Oskolupov's green eyes opened wide in astonishment.



Telephone operators work at the manual switchboard of the Leningrad City Telephone Exchange in 1922.



Old Russian telephone.

“Not guilty of anything at all? The security service will sort that one out.”

Having said this, he left without a word of praise for the two exponents of the new science. [...]

They sat down on the same chairs on which they had sat such a short while ago, dreaming of the great future of their newborn science. They said nothing.

It was as if their whole beautiful fragile structure had been stamped on.

Since two could be arrested to make sure of one, why not arrest all five to make it easier still?⁴⁰

In the works of Solzhenitsyn, all constructed meta-languages and all technological means are thematized as fundamentally falsified and alienating.⁴¹ This includes the use of numbers in place of human names in the system of prison camp records, as well as the use of X-ray therapy in the novel *Cancer Ward*. In Solzhenitsyn's texts, the telephone is both an object and a means of observation; it comprises an element of the modern political-technological system, in counterbalance to which Solzhenitsyn proposes a utopian program, turning his back on modernity in any form.

With the end of World War II in Vasily Grossman's magnificent epic *Life and Fate* (1959, published 1980), the nightmares of the terror, the front and the camps both in Germany and in the Soviet Union seem to be fading away in an atmosphere of relief. But suddenly the central character, the nuclear physicist and Academician Viktor Shtrum, feels that his situation is threatened, possibly a sign of a new wave of anti-Semitism and purges. People stop greeting him, friends stop calling, Shtrum stays home waiting for his arrest. Suddenly, one afternoon the telephone rings. It is Stalin:

“Good day, comrade Shtrum.”

At that moment everything came together in a jumble of half-formed thoughts and feelings – triumph, a sense of weakness, fear that all this might just be a some maniac playing a trick on him, pages of closely written manuscripts, that endless questionnaire, the *Lyubyanka*. . . .

Viktor knew that his fate was now being settled. He also had a vague sense of loss, as though he had

lost something peculiarly dear to him, something good and touching.

“Good day, Iosif Vissarionovich”, he said, astonished to hear himself pronouncing such unimaginable words on the telephone.⁴²

The conversation lasts just a few minutes. Stalin says that he considers Shtrum's work interesting and useful and asks if he has everything he needs.

With a sincerity that he himself found astonishing, Viktor said: “Thank you very much, Iosif Vissarionovich. My working conditions are perfectly satisfactory.”

Lyudmila [Shtrum's wife] was still standing up, as though Stalin could see her. Viktor motioned to her to sit down. Stalin was silent again, thinking over what Viktor had said.

“Goodbye, comrade Shtrum. I wish you success in your work.”

“Goodbye, comrade Stalin.”⁴³

When Shtrum comes to his institute after several weeks' absence, everything seems to have changed.

Viktor had imagined that the people who had tried to destroy him would now be too ashamed even to look at him. Instead, they greeted him joyfully on his return to the Institute, looking him straight in the eye as they expressed their heartfelt goodwill. The most extraordinary thing of all was that these people were quite sincere; now, they really did wish Viktor well.⁴⁴

A victim of complete resignation and vulnerable nakedness in front of total power, Shtrum receives Stalin's telephone call as a gift. In the grim irony of Grossman's novel, the gesture of total control and total arbitrariness of power is seen by those afflicted as a ray of light and a gesture of grace from above. Here, McLuhan's “irresistible intruder” has acquired a completely different meaning. ❌

references

- 1 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker: a Film by Andrey Tarkovsky* (Mosfilm 1979), Artificial Eye DVD.
- 2 Cf. Lars Kleberg, “K semiotike telefona” [On the semiotics of the telephone], in: Ben Hellman, Tomi Huttunen & Gennady Obatnin (eds.), *Varietas et Concordia: Essays in Honour of Pekka Pesonen* (Slavica Helsingiensia 31), Helsinki 2007, pp. 362–378 (with a comprehensive bibliography). The present essay is a revised version of this article. The first book-length study of the topic is Irina Lazarova, “Hier spricht Lenin”: *Das Telefon in der russischen Literatur der 1920er und 1930er Jahre*, Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna 2010.
- 3 Sidney Aronson, “The Sociology of the Telephone”, in *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. XII:3 (1971) pp. 153–167.
- 4 *Mezhdunarodnaia kompaniia telefonov Bellia: spisok abonentam na telefonnoe soobshchenie v Moskve* [Bell International Telephone Company: Directory of subscribers in Moscow], Moscow 1896.
- 5 John Brooks, *Telephone: The First Hundred Years*, New York 1976, p. 94. Data for 1982 show, after the enormous development of communications technology in the world, virtually the same proportion of inhabitants per telephone: USA – 1.3; Sweden – 1.2; Switzerland – 1.3; FRG – 2.0 (GDR – 5.1); France – 1.8; Italy – 2.7; USSR – 11.3; *Britannica Book of the Year 1985*, pp. 898–902.
- 6 “Telefon (ekon.)” [Telephone (econ.)], in *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' Brokgauza-Efrona* [Brockhaus-Efron encyclopedic dictionary], v. 64, Moscow 1901, p. 814.
- 7 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, New York 1964, p. 271.
- 8 Stalin allegedly opposed Trotsky's plans to expand the telephone net for the people saying, “It will unmake our work. No greater instrument for counterrevolution and conspiracy can be imagined”. See Henry M. Boettiger, “Our Sixth-and-a-Half Sense”, in Ithiel de Sola Pool (ed.), *The Social Impact of the Telephone*, Cambridge, Mass. 1977, p. 203. – Stalin himself always had a number of different telephone lines at his disposal. Nikolai Bukharin is said to have called Stalin “Genghis Khan with a telephone”.
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- 10 S. Frederick Starr, “New Communications Technologies and Civil Society”, in Loren R. Graham (ed.), *Science and Soviet*

- Social Order*, Cambridge, Mass. 1990, pp. 19–50.
- 11 *Moskva: Telefoni i adresa organizatsii, uchrezhdenii i predprii-
atii*. 1989 [Moscow: Telephones and addresses of organiza-
tions, institutions and enterprises. 1989], Moscow 1989,
pp. 4–5.
 - 12 Karl Schlögel, *Terror und Traum: Moskau 1937*, ch. “Topog-
raphie des Verschwindens: das Moskauer Adressbuch von
1936”, pp. 101–113; also Karl Schlögel, *Moscow*, transl. by
Helen Atkins, London 2005, pp. 161–177.
 - 13 On the scarcity of telephone directories, see Vyacheslav
Kuritsyns interesting article “Stolbtsy: Chitaem telefonnuu
knigu” [Columns: Reading the telephone directory], in
Nezavisimaia gazeta, 1992-03-18. In her essay, “A Spy in the
Archives”, Sheila Fitzpatrick recalls the difficulties a young
foreign scholar in the 1960s encountered when she wanted
to study prewar Soviet telephone directories in the Lenin
Library: *London Review of Books*, 2010-12-23 (vol. 32:23), pp.
3–8. The results of Fitzpatrick’s analysis were finally pub-
lished as “The Impact of the Great Purges on Soviet Elites: A
Case Study from Moscow and Leningrad Telephone Direc-
tories of the 1930s”, in J. Arch Getty & Roberta T. Manning
(eds.), *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, Cambridge 1993, pp.
225–246. – A unique collection of Soviet telephone direc-
tories – internal as well as more generally available ones – from
the 1930 editions on, is held at the Library of Congress in
Washington, DC. See “Address/Telephone Directories from
Russia at the Library of Congress”, [http://www.loc.gov/rr/
european/phone/rpintro.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/european/phone/rpintro.html) (accessed January 2012).
 - 14 In Konstantin Simonov’s novel *The Living and the Dead* (1962),
the hero returns in autumn 1941 from the front and finds Mos-
cow in chaos, expecting the imminent German attack: “How
should I know where everybody’s gone!” said the house
supervisor, and he climbed into the lorry. “They’ve burned
the registers, they’ve burned everything today, they’ve even
burned the telephone books! Everything!”
 - 15 *Spisok abonentov Moskovskoi gorodskoi telefonnoi seti* [Di-
rectory of Moscow Telephone Subscribers], 1–4, Moscow
1971–1972. – Cf. Hedrick Smith, *The Russians*, New York 1976,
pp. 353–354.
 - 16 In Stockholm, at the same time, 1,140,000 copies, or approxi-
mately one copy per subscriber, were distributed (1972).
 - 17 The unqualified application of the private–public dichotomy
to Soviet society, especially during the Stalin era, can be
questioned, as has been done by Jochen Hellbeck in his study
of diaries from the 1930s: “The problem of applying a public–
private binary to Stalin era diaries and subjectivities is that it
projects a liberal understanding of selfhood into the Soviet
context”, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*,
Cambridge, Mass. 2006, p. 86. – A special case, unknown in
Western Europe or the US, were the collective telephones
of the communal flats (about ten percent of all apartment
telephones in Moscow in 1972), which in practice made any
private telephone conversation impossible. Cf. Ilya Utekhin,
Ocherki kommunal’nogo byta [Sketches of communal living],
Moscow 2001.
 - 18 According to legend, Stalin managed to manipulate himself
into total power over the other Party leaders thanks to the
wiretapping of even this secret system in the 1920s. The leg-
end probably emanates from Stalin’s former secretary Boris
Bazhanov, who escaped to the West in 1928 and in 1930 pub-
lished his memoirs in France. Cf. Boris Bazhanov, *Bazhanov
and the Damnation of Stalin*, transl. and comm. by David W.
Doyle, Athens 1990 [1930], pp. 39–41.
 - 19 Curiously enough, one learns from the reproduced pages of
the directory that the number to the office of the head of the
Cheka, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, was “007”. [http://www.liveinter-
net.ru/users/boss_shadow/post107912912/](http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/boss_shadow/post107912912/) (accessed January
2012).
 - 20 R. G. Pikhoina, *Sovetskii soiuz: istoriia vlasti 1945–1991* [Soviet
Union: the history of power 1945–1991], Novosibirsk 2000,
pp. 6–7. See also Michael Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: Anatomy
of the Soviet Ruling Class*, transl. by Eric Mosbacher, London
1984, pp. 207–213; Lazarova, op.cit., pp. 64–68; for techni-
cal aspects of the vertushka system, see also V. V. Pavlov
(ed.), *Pravitel’stvennaia elektrosviaz’ v istorii Rossii* [Govern-
ment electrical communication in Russian history], pt. 1:
1917–1945, Moscow 2001 and Mikhail Il’inskii, *Tainny spetssvi-*
- azi Stalina 1917–1945 gg.* [The Secrets of Stalin’s special
communications systems 1917–1945], Moscow: Veche
2004. – A recent collection of illustrated Soviet nos-
talgia confuses the vertushka with a military tele-
phone without any rotary dial at all: “Vertushka
– Dialless Diplomatic Telephone”, in Michael
Idov (ed.), *Made in Russia: Unsung Icons of
Soviet Design*, New York 2011, pp. 206–208.
– Concerning the continuation of the ver-
tushka in post-Soviet Russia, cf. Viktoriia
Arutiunova, “Spetssviaz’ vremen” [Spe-
cial communications of the times], in
*Kommersant–Vlast’: Ezhenedel’nyi anal-
iticheskii zhurnal*, 11 June, 2000, No. 27
(378), p. 20; Ol’ga Tatarchenko, “S vami
budet govorit’ president” [The president
will speak with you], *ibid.*, p. 21–22.
- 21 Stalin’s calls to the writers Michail Bulgakov and Boris Pas-
ternak are particularly legendary. See Marietta Chudakova,
Zhizneopisanie Mikhaila Bulgakova [A biography of Mikhail
Bulgakov], Moscow 1988, pp. 437–440; Vitaly Shentalinsky,
The KGB’s Literary Archive, transl., abridged, and annotated
by John Crowfoot, London 1995, pp. 90–93; Lazar Fleish-
man, *Boris Pasternak v tridesiatye gody* [Boris Pasternak in the
1930s], Jerusalem 1984, pp. 175–187; Nadezhda Mandelshtam,
Hope Abandoned: A Memoir, transl. by Max Hayward, London
1974, p. 146. Fleishman examines all the circumstances of Pas-
ternak’s conversation with Stalin about Mandelshtam in 1934,
including the poet’s unsuccessful attempts, after Stalin had
hung up, to redial the number through which he had been
ordered to contact the leader.
 - 22 Aleksandr Yakovlev, *Tsel’ zhizni: zapiski aviakonstruktora*
[The aim of a lifetime: Notes of an aircraft designer], Moscow
2000, p. 157. – This passage is not included in the English
translation by Vladimir Vezey, *The Aim of a Lifetime: The Story
of Alexander Yakovlev, Designer of the YAK Fighter Plane*, Mos-
cow 1972.
 - 23 Walter Wager, *Telefon*, London. The title of the novel, as well
as that of Don Siegel’s film starring Charles Bronson (1977),
is written in “Russian”, *Telefon*, and with the correct English
spelling.
 - 24 Frederick Forsyth, *Icon*, London 1996, pp. 401–402.
 - 25 A. P. Chekhov, “U telefona” [On the telephone], *Polnoe so-
branie sochinenii i pisem* [Complete works and letters], v. 4,
Moscow, pp. 312–314.
 - 26 *Slovar’ sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo iazyka* [Diction-
ary of the contemporary standard Russian language], v. 15,
Moscow 1963, p. 222.
 - 27 Roman Timenchik, “K simbolike telefona v russkoi poezii”
[On the symbolics of the telephone in Russian poetry], in
Trudy po znakovym sistemam [Studies in sign systems], XXII,
Tartu 1988, pp.155–163.
 - 28 Nikolai Gumilev, “Telefon” (1918), in *Sobranie sochinenii v
chetyrekh tomakh* [Collected works], v. 2, Moscow 1991, p. 26.
 - 29 Osip Mandelshtam, “Telefon” (1918), *Sobranie sochinenii v
trekh tomakh* [Collected Works], v.1, Washington 1967, p. 143.
– For a discussion of the telephone in Mandelshtam’s poetry,
see L. L. Gorelik, “Tainstvennoe stikhotvorenii ‘Telefon’ O.
Mandel’shtama” [O. Mandelshtam’s enigmatic poem “The
telephone”], *Izvestiia RAN:z Seriia literatury i iazyka*, 2006:2
(vol. 65), pp. 49–54.
 - 30 Vadim Rudnev, *Entsiiklopedicheskii slovar’ kul’tury XX veka*
[Encyclopedic dictionary of twentieth century culture], Mos-
cow 2001, p. 466.
 - 31 Anna Han, “‘Telefon brosaetsia na vsekh’: metamorfozy
telefonnogo apparata v poeme Maiakovskogo ‘Pro eto’” [The
telephone hurls itself on everyone: Metamorphoses of the
telephone in Mayakovsky’s poem “About This”], in *Acta Uni-
versitatis Szegediensis: Dissertationes Slavicae; Sectio Historiae
Litterarum* XXIV, Szeged 2006, pp. 177–197, quotation on p.
185.
 - 32 Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Mayakovsky*, transl. by Herbert Mar-
shall, London 1965, p. 166.
 - 33 Mayakovsky included a telephone conversation early on in
the poem *A Cloud in Trousers* (1915): “Hello! / Who is speak-
ing? / Mama? / Mama! / Your son is gloriously ill! / Mama!”
– There are plenty of examples of Maiakovsky’s and the
- Soviet Russian avantgarde’s interest in the telephone, e.g.
El Lissitzky’s dummy for Maiakovsky’s book *Dlia golosa* [For
the voice] (1923), designed in the form of a telephone book,
and Aleksandr Rodchenko’s collage illustrations to the poem
“About This”. The information in Ericsson’s centenary pub-
lication that Rodchenko proposed a design for a telephone
booth in the shape of a gigantic telephone seems less convinc-
ing. See *Eriksson v Rossii: pervyye 100 let – Ericsson in Russia:
First 100 Years*, Moscow 1997, pp. 109–115.
- 34 On the de-privatization of the telephone system in Russia
after 1918, see Steven L. Solnick, “Revolution, Reform and the
Soviet Telephone System, 1917–1927”, in *Soviet Studies*, vol.
43:1 (1991), pp. 162–163 and Iu. V. Krasik, *Telefon* [The Tele-
phone], Moscow 2000, p. 314.
 - 35 Boris Pilnyak, “The Death of the Army Commander: A Tale
of the Unextinguished Moon”, in *Fifty Years fo Russian Prose:
From Pasternak to Solzhenitsyn*, Krystyna Pomorska (ed.),
Cambridge, Mass., vol. 1, pp. 65–66. – On the symbolism of
numbers in Pilnyak’s story, see Elena Semeka, “A Structural
Analysis of Boris Pil’njak’s ‘Povest’ nepogašennoy luny” in:
Andrej Kodjak et al. (eds.), *The Structural Analysis of Narrative
Texts*, Columbus, Ohio 1980, pp. 145–169.
 - 36 Mikhail Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* [Collect-
ed works in five volumes], Moscow 1990, v. 5, p. 108; italics
mine. – The effect of the receiver speaking as if by itself is lost
in the English translation: “‘They’re busy’, a crackling voice
replied, ‘Who may I say is calling?’”, in *The Master and Margarita*,
transl. by Diana Burgin & Katherine Tiernan O’Connor,
London 1995,
p. 91.
 - 37 *The Master and Margarita*, p. 127.
 - 38 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
 - 39 *Ibid.*, p. 282.
 - 40 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, transl. by Max Hay-
ward, Manya Harari & Michael Glenny, London, pp. 511–512.
 - 41 Krystyna Pomorska, “The Overcoded World of Solzhenitsyn”,
Poetics Today, vol. 1:3 (1980), pp. 163–170; reprint: “Alexander
Solzhenitsyn: The Overcoded World”, Krystyna Pomorska,
Jakobsonian Poetics and Slavic Narrative, Durham, N. C. 1992,
pp. 47–56.
 - 42 Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, transl. by Robert Chandler,
New York 1985, p. 762.
 - 43 *Ibid.*, p. 763.
 - 44 *Ibid.*, p. 818.

